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Letter dated 7 April 1993 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In my capacity as Chairman of the General Assembly's Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), I wish to bring to your attention the Group's concerns about the critical financial situation facing UNRWA this year.

The Commissioner-General of UNRWA has informed the Agency's major donors and other members of the international community that UNRWA faces a deficit totalling some $28.5 million in fiscal year 1993 of its budget for the biennium 1992-1993.

Of this projected deficit, some $17 million is anticipated as a shortfall in the funding of the General Fund budget. This finances the bulk of the Agency's vital education, health, relief and social services for some 2.7 million registered Palestine refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the occupied territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The remaining $11.5 million of the projected deficit would arise from a lack of funding for the Agency's Extraordinary Measures for Lebanon and the Occupied Territory (EMLOT), which have been providing crucial emergency, general assistance and rehabilitation programmes for refugees in those areas.

The reasons for this gap in the funding of the UNRWA budget may be summarized as follows: reductions in spending on overseas development aid by some Governments have meant a levelling off or actual cuts in contributions to humanitarian agencies such as UNRWA; currency devaluations and fluctuations have also cut sharply into the resources of UNRWA, much of whose expenditures,

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including the salaries of many of its 20,000 staff, are calculated in dollars; and, finally, there is a steady annual increase in the number of refugees, through demographic growth and increased need, who rely on UNRWA services.

The shortfall in the General Fund will mean not only that the Agency will be unable to enhance services to the refugees, or to respond to new needs, but also that there will inevitably be a drop in the quality of existing services. For example, about 400,000 Palestine refugee children attend UNRWA schools. Many of those schools already have more than 50 children in a classroom. Such overcrowding will worsen this year, with serious repercussions for educational standards, if the Agency cannot build additional classrooms and employ additional teachers for nearly 13,000 new students.

The health care provided by UNRWA to Palestine refugees will suffer similar negative effects. In some UNRWA health centres in Gaza, doctors already see more than 200 patients a day. The UNRWA hospitalization programme also may have to be cut back, with serious implications for many refugees, especially the poorest among them.

UNRWA relief services will also face cutbacks. The Special Hardship Case programme, which caters to the neediest refugees, will have to be frozen at 1992 levels and there will be no funds to buy blankets, shoes and clothing or to provide cash assistance to families whose homes are destroyed.

Equally alarming is the projected lack of funding for EMLOT. Unless the Agency can obtain those funds, urgently needed emergency programmes in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank will have to be halted or curtailed. These include emergency afternoon clinics, a legal aid scheme, assistance to refugees whose homes have been damaged, sealed or demolished, and the Refugee Affairs Officer (RAO) programme. This programme, introduced in the occupied territory after the outbreak of the intifadah, is of even greater importance now in a period of increased hardship and spiralling violence. The RAO programme has been much appreciated by the Palestinian community and by major donors alike, and any reduction in this area would have serious consequences.

At a time when regional and global economies are in a troubled state, the refugee community in the UNRWA area of operations is especially vulnerable to the effects of increasing socio-economic hardship. This is particularly the case in the occupied territory and Lebanon. About 7 per cent of the refugees registered with UNRWA are special hardship cases; of these over 70 per cent are in those three fields. Cuts in the services which Palestine refugees need most in their daily lives - providing them with food, education, health care and shelter - would be unconscionable.

As this letter is written, all Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank are being barred from entry to Israel and east Jerusalem. During 1992, the Gaza Strip was completely sealed off twice within six months. Then as now, tens of thousands of labourers were unable to work in Israel, merchants were unable to market their wares, agricultural produce could not be exported and the economy ground to a halt, leading to the loss of tens of millions of dollars.

The budget constraints faced by UNRWA could not have come at a worse time. With efforts under way to regenerate and invigorate the Middle East peace

process, a reduction in services by the United Nations agency charged with looking after the basic human needs of Palestine refugees would send the wrong signal to those who have the most to gain or lose from the outcome of the negotiations. Given its fragility, the peace process should at all stages be accompanied by socio-economic measures which would increase confidence in the negotiations.

The Commissioner-General has issued three appeals to major donors, most recently in February 1993, and has followed these up with visits to capitals. Most recently, he has visited Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in the hope that the financial and economic resources of the Gulf States, together with their sympathy and support for the Palestine refugees, could enable them to increase their hitherto limited contributions to UNRWA. A special meeting of the Advisory Commission of UNRWA was held at Vienna in March, followed by a briefing for major donors.

I would like to add the voice of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA to those who are appealing for increased financial support to this vital humanitarian programme of the United Nations.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter circulated as an official document of the General Assembly under item 85 of the preliminary list.

(Signed) Mustafa AKŞIN
Ambassador
Permanent Representative